



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: BAHRAIN

February 2020

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### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international  
freedom of religion or  
belief, by independently  
assessing and unflinchingly  
confronting threats to this  
fundamental right.*

## Religious Freedom Conditions in Bahrain in 2019

*By Scott Weiner, Policy Analyst*

### Overview

In the months following the release of USCIRF's [2019 Annual Report](#), the Bahraini government has continued to make some progress toward improved religious freedom conditions. In March 2019, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) [participated](#) in the 200th anniversary celebration of Bahrain's Hindu community at a ceremony in Manama along with Bahrain's Foreign Minister and several members of the royal family. In April, Bahrain's government reinstated the citizenship of 551 Bahrainis—mostly Shi'a Muslims—which it had previously revoked. In June 2019, the synagogue in Manama hosted its first morning worship service in [more than 70 years](#), attended predominantly by American participants in the Trump administration's Middle East peace workshop. Bahrain's foreign minister also participated, for the second year, in the State Department's Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, in Washington, DC in July 2019.

However, the government of Bahrain continued to restrict religious freedom in other areas in 2019. It stripped 138 Shi'a Bahrainis of their citizenship *en masse*, interrogated Shi'a Muslim clerics and poetry reciters ahead of the holiday of Ashura, and restricted the religious practices of Shi'a Muslim prisoners. These limitations are occurring in the context of a broader crackdown on dissent in Bahrain. For example, in May, Bahrain's Ministry of Interior [announced an investigation](#) into international social media accounts that "encourage sedition and harm civil peace, social fabric and stability." Government authorities also [demolished](#) the headquarters of the opposition newspaper al-Wasat, which it had [forcibly closed](#) in 2017 for "sowing divisions."

Bahrain's government appears eager to make a break from the events that followed the upheaval of 2011 by implementing political reforms, and it has shown genuine progress toward this goal. At the same time, it must take further steps to address the systematic and ongoing restrictions on religious freedom that continue to impact the lives of Bahrain's citizens.

A USCIRF delegation visited Bahrain in March 2019 to hear firsthand about religious freedom conditions in the country. The delegation met with civil society leaders, government officials, and faith communities, and attended a *majlis* gathering hosted by His Highness Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa.



## Religious Freedom Developments in 2019

### Ashura in Bahrain

Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain observe Ashura by commemorating the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, during the Battle of Karbala in the year 680 CE. Bahrain is notably the only country on the Arabian Peninsula that designates Ashura as a national holiday. Shi'a mourners hang commemorative banners, march in large processions, beat their chests, and wave flags to symbolize the flag carried during the battle by Hussein's brother Abbas, who was also martyred during the battle. Mourners observe Ashura in gathering spaces called *matams* (also called *husseiniyat*), which host speeches and performances.<sup>1</sup>

Although Bahrain's government generally allows Shi'a Muslims to observe Ashura, it places some restrictions on this observance. It justifies these restrictions on security grounds and the need to maintain public order, but the arbitrary enforcement of some of those restrictions suggests that they are not all based on legitimate security concerns. Additionally, the delineation can be ambiguous regarding which speech and actions during Ashura are lawful or prohibited. This ambiguity risks creating a chilling effect on religious expression and observance, especially given a recent history in Bahrain of the government's repression of Ashura observances.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the relocation to Iran in February 2019 of Sheikh Issa Qasim – Bahrain's most senior Shi'a cleric and a vocal anti-government dissident – has further exacerbated the conflation of religion and politics. For example, in June 2019, during a speech in Qom, Sheikh Qasim criticized the high-level U.S. conference on Israeli-Palestinian peace hosted in Bahrain. In September 2019 he declared that "resistance will reach its goal," during a speech in Tehran.

Bahrain's Interior Minister, General Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa, *met* with the heads of *matams* ahead of this year's Ashura observances. On September 3, he said that Bahrain would respect freedom of worship but also *warned* that "there is a need to protect our national identity and avoid anything that could harm the civic peace and social fabric," without elaborating on what that vague reference to "anything" might entail. Bahrain's Head of General Security, Major General Tariq bin Hassan al-Hassan, also visited local police officials to ensure proper preparations ahead of Ashura processions. He called for Bahrainis to *act within* "established legal controls" but did not specify which particular legal controls.

In contrast to previous years, Bahraini security services did not use tear gas during Ashura processions or otherwise interfere with public Ashura gatherings in 2019. However, security forces *summoned multiple clerics*

<sup>1</sup> The word *matam* itself refers to an Islamic mourning ritual, but in the Bahraini context, it connotes a space for mourners to gather during Ashura.

<sup>2</sup> During the 2011 protests in Bahrain, the government *demolished* the *Imam al-Hadi matam* in Hamed Town. To date, there are no official *matams* in the town and Shi'a Muslims tend to gather instead next to mosques. In *2012* and *2013* Bahraini security forces used tear gas on Ashura participants and in 2014 *fired tear gas* into a *matam* in the village of Karzkan. During Ashura in 2016, police *removed religious flags* and banners on the grounds that they impeded traffic, but also called them "a violation of tradition related to the religious occasion." In 2018, Bahrain *arrested 13 preachers* for violating sermon laws (seven were Sunni Muslims and six were Shi'a Muslims), and arrested *three clerics* for allegedly "encouraging acts of terrorism" in their sermons. Security forces also *arrested 15* Ashura participants over "indulging in abusive activities to cause chaos," and accused them of alleged links to Iran.

over the content of their religious sermons—some more than once. They forced one cleric to explain his use of a standard Ashura prayer which says, “Curse those who killed you [Hussein].” Security services interrogated another cleric over a standard supplication from the end of sermons beseeching Allah to “free the imprisoned” on the grounds that it represented political speech. Five poetry reciters (*ruadeed*) and six *matam* officials were summoned as well. In at least [17 cases](#), Bahraini security officials removed religious banners and signs associated with the observance of Ashura.

### Stripping Shi’a Muslims of Citizenship

Iran’s support for malign activities in Bahrain has been documented widely, and it may increase following increased regional tensions in January 2020. However, the Bahraini government has sometimes used this support as a pretext to crack down excessively on some Shi’a Muslim opposition leaders, clerics, and activists, without substantiating its charges of subversion or criminal activity. Several peaceful Bahraini opposition activists now live in exile as a result of citizenship revocations on this purported basis. As USCIRF noted in its 2019 annual report, Bahrain’s government often [revokes](#) citizenship from dissidents on the grounds that they are complicit in terrorism, a tool that it uses disproportionately against Shi’a Muslims and with few legal safeguards to protect individual rights and freedoms.

[According to the Congressional Research Service](#), the Bahraini government has revoked the citizenship of 990 Bahrainis since 2012, deporting many of them to other countries in the Gulf region. Most of the deportations were Bahraini Shi’as of Persian origin. In November 2018, the government revoked the citizenship of [115 people](#) after a mass trial. On April 16, 2019, Bahrain [stripped citizenship](#) from 138 Shi’a Muslims following a mass trial based on [allegations](#) that they had set up a cell linked to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and that some had received training in Iran from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hizbullah. This was the largest number of Bahrainis whose citizenship had been revoked at the same time. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet [expressed alarm](#) over the mass revocation and cautioned that nationality must not be denied on discriminatory grounds, including on the basis of religion.

Bahrain’s king announced on April 21 that Bahrain would [reinstate citizenship](#) for 551 people from whom it had been revoked through court order. The next week, Bahrain’s Ministry of Interior, along with the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, [established procedures](#) for the reinstatement of citizenship. Nevertheless, many of the remaining Bahraini nationals whose citizenship was revoked remain under life sentences or the threat of execution.

### Freedom of Religion in Bahraini Prisons

In August 2019, 600 prisoners at Jaw and Dry Dock prisons in Bahrain joined a hunger strike to appeal for better treatment. Among their demands was the right to participate in [religious rituals](#) and to be housed near prisoners with the same religious affiliation in order to better facilitate group prayer. Bahrain’s National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR) sent a delegation to [monitor](#) conditions in the prisons during the strike.

NIHR deemed some of the strike demands legitimate, but declared that it was “satisfied with the level of facilities and services” provided at the prisons. However, as a result of the NIHR’s intervention, prison officials doubled the allotted time for prisoners’ Ashura observance from one hour to two hours. Prisoners in [Isa Town Prison](#) and Jaw Prison were allegedly prohibited from commemorating Ashura in groups, and prison authorities restricted the times in which they were allowed to conduct their commemorations. Shi’a prisoners also were denied access to [religious books](#). Certain prisoners, however, remained prohibited from commemorating Ashura at all. Hajer Mansoor, the mother-in-law of Bahraini dissident Sayed al-Wadaei, was denied access to religious materials and prohibited from any observance of the holiday. USCIRF has also [expressed concern](#) that Bahraini prisons have barred [dissemination](#) of many Shi’a Muslim religious texts ahead of Muharram.

### U.S. Policy

The Trump administration has prioritized a close defense relationship with Bahrain in order to counter Iran’s influence in the region and its attempts to destabilize Bahrain. Following a February 2019 meeting between former CENTCOM Commander Joseph Votel and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad, the United States and Bahrain concluded several major arms agreements. These agreements included a \$750 million arms sale approved by the Senate in June, a Patriot missile defense system sale worth \$2.5 billion made by the U.S. Army in August, and a \$150 million sale of a frigate ship

approved by the State Department in October. Bahrain also hosted the June “Peace to Prosperity” workshop on an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement, led by White House Senior Advisor Jared Kushner. In July, at the State Department’s Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, Bahraini Foreign Minister Khaled bin Ahmed Al Khalifa met with Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz, the first-ever public meeting between officials from those two countries.

Although the United States and Bahrain enjoy a close defense relationship, Congress has continued to express concerns about freedom of religion or belief in the country. During Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa’s visit to the White House in September 2019, Senators Marco Rubio, Ronald Wyden, and Christopher Murphy [released a bipartisan letter](#) to President Trump noting that they were “concerned by the government of Bahrain’s concerted efforts to silence peaceful opposition and quash free expression.” This statement addressed broader human rights issues, but it also included the banning of Shi’a Muslim-majority political parties and the issuance of a life sentence against Shi’a Muslim Sheikh Ali Salman.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In its 2019 annual report, USCIRF [recommended](#) that the United States urge Bahrain to clarify its laws prohibiting “inciting hatred” and imposing jail time for blasphemy; better enforce laws prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sectarian affiliation; and relax censorship laws as recommended by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report. A clearer and more consistent application of existing laws can have a positive effect on religious freedom in Bahrain.

The Trump administration should:

- Release an updated assessment of the Bahraini government’s implementation of the [BICI report](#) recommendations, with a particular eye toward recommendation 1724a relating to censorship of beliefs.
- Continue to provide guidance and training for Bahrain’s security services to prepare for Ashura observances in ways that protect observers’ religious freedom rights and minimize the potential for escalation.

Congress should:

- Continue to conduct periodic fact-finding missions and congressional delegation trips to Bahrain to assess religious freedom conditions there.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

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